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## Female Divinities and Story-Telling in the Work of Tamara Kamenszain

### Abstract

Tamara Kamenszain (b. Argentina, 1947), in her creative writing and her essays, brings together two concerns. One is her examination of concepts of woman and femininity. She specializes in mythical and archetypal representations of woman. Her texts present such figures as the great mother and forest nymphs. On many occasions, she evokes a past in which female divinities were respected, even in the Judaic tradition that is frequently Kamenszain's frame of reference. The other current that stands out in Kamenszain's writing is her interest in Jewish traditions of informal narrative. In her texts, folk narrative displaces learned and canonical narrative. Her concern is not only with stories about magic, but also with tale-telling as a magic practice. Kamenszain's writing often makes the point that magic, and particularly feminine magic, has succumbed to modernization. Setting her own writing in opposition to this tendency, Kamenszain brings back feminine magic forces and endows biblical heroines with the talents of sorceresses, priestesses, or goddesses. Her narratives also suggest that women have a special way of reading, learning, and storytelling.

### Keywords

Tamara Kamenszain, Argentine literature, creative writing, women, femininity, myth, archetype, great mother, female divinities, Judaic tradition, Jewish tradition, folk narrative, magic, tale, feminine magic

## Female Divinities and Story-Telling in the Work of Tamara Kamenszain

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In the writing of Tamara Kamenszain (Argentina, 1947), both her imaginative work and her essays, two preoccupations are of particular interest for this discussion. One is her examination of concepts of woman and femininity. She lays special emphasis on metaphorical, mythical, and archetypal representations of woman rather than on realistic accounts of women characters. She elaborates such concepts as the great mother and female divinities or feminine forces in nature. Her writing explores the theme that, famously examined by Raphael Patai in his much-cited *The Hebrew Goddess* (3rd. rev. ed. 1990), has proven attractive to a women's-studies audience as well as to a public concerned with Jewish themes: the history of Jewish thought includes more feminine entities than the officially honored biblical heroines and the concept of a female divine presence, the Shekhina or Matronit. One may also find traces left by contact with religious cultures featuring goddess worship or an animistic understanding of the world. Here are reminders of the Canaanite nature cult whose goddesses attracted the Hebrew people for some six centuries (Patai 34). One of Kamenszain's specialties is the lyricized, nostalgic evocation of a time in which there was widespread belief in maternal forces, divine or at least mythic, at work in the natural world. In *De este lado del Mediterráneo* (From this side of the Mediterranean), her 1973 collection of poetic prose, she expresses regret for the passing of lunar divinities: "En la época en que el arroz y la palabra eran lo mismo, los

hombres flacos se arrodillaban ante una luna femenina pero indeterminada que recorría tranquila su camino de galaxias. Qué seco está hoy ese camino que lleva de la tierra a la luna . . .” ‘In the time when rice and the word were one, thin men knelt before a moon that was feminine but indeterminate, which calmly traversed its route of galaxies. How dried-up it is today, that route that leads from the earth to the moon . . .’ (*De este lado* 22). Glimpses of this lost world, charged with magical significance, surface amid cold, routinized modernity. Commuters on a streetcar are lovestruck by an entrancing woman of the forest, who seems to be the apotheosis of an earth goddess. Her “trenzas rubias” ‘blond braids’ (61) suggest an origin in the pre-Christian North of Europe, where a number of important goddesses enjoyed general recognition. Witnesses to the nature goddess’s anachronistic apparition long to abandon modernity and live in her sylvan setting “para que la palabra naturaleza no sea más una palabra” ‘so the word nature will no longer be a word’ (61). In Kamenszain’s work, a culture’s recognition of female divine forces appears as a boon to women living in that civilization, a point to which feminist scholars have often returned.<sup>1</sup>

The other current to be singled out in Kamenszain’s writing is her interest in Jewish traditions of informal, extra-official narrative. She takes as her raw material folk-level story-telling in preference to more learned and prestigious types of narrative. Her concern is often not only with narratives containing magic elements, but also with tale-telling itself as a way of practicing magic and casting spells. For example, she expresses a nostalgic longing for the lost art of telling stories by casting shadows with the hands, an entertainment that strikes its youthful audience as bordering on magic (*De este lado* 12). In her selection of material from Jewish tradition, she includes a high proportion of elements that have been elaborated in great part as magic lore, going well beyond canonical sources. She favors beliefs about the Prophet Elijah; the Angel of Death and other angels; holy sites, cities, and lands; consecrated and defiled objects; God’s folkloric attributes, such as a long beard and a cane; and entities that are visible only to the eyes of the initiated.

The popular re-elaboration of narratives of biblical and Talmudic provenance, which a household's patriarch retells as fireside amusement and instruction, is the point of departure for Kamenszain's *De este lado del Mediterráneo*. Kamenszain, in a personal statement of 1986 laced with autobiographical reflections, identifies her childhood beginnings as a writer with just such a situation: "creo que el germen de mi vocación literaria se empezó a gestar en esa relación narrativa con mi abuelo" 'I believe that the seed of my vocation as a writer began to sprout in this narrative relation with my grandfather' ("Toda escritura" 130). In *De este lado*, the narrator-heroine reconstructs the variants on biblical themes she heard as a child "sentándose en las rodillas de un abuelo" 'sitting on the knees of a grandfather' (*De este lado* 40). Throughout the book, the reader's knowledge of the grandfather's story-telling is exclusively through the mediation of the granddaughter, now a nostalgically reminiscing adult. There are no direct quotations from the grandfather's words. While occasionally the narrator utilizes an indirect free style of the type "Mi abuelo decía que . . ." 'My grandfather said that . . .' (40), she more characteristically evokes the grandfather's stories and their amazing twists and turns as they most struck her imagination.

It is clear that the grandfather was not a close student of sacred texts or an outstandingly pious man, although his narratives at times feature amazing feats of scholarly devotion to sacred learning. There is nothing in *De este lado* to suggest that the grandfather has been reading the Bible in Hebrew. *De este lado* contains very few references to direct reading of the Bible, though there are many allusions to its use as a talisman or object of veneration: kissing it, keeping a copy nearby, and caring for its physical condition. The grandfather treats biblical narratives freely, as part of the repertory of tales available to story-tellers in search of material.

Rather than a scholar, exegete, or preacher, the grandfather is a great teller of tales, and would have been recognized as a skilled spellbinder in any culture. Though he tries to tell his granddaughter that he is a defender of orthodoxy, "el único profeta familiar, elegido de Dios para sacarme del error" 'the only family prophet, chosen by God to save me from error'

(70), she treats his claims with irony, and the reader is struck by the grandfather's hedonistic concentration on producing thrilling and hair-raising effects. He draws upon biblical and Talmudic material, but also on whatever other turns of plot he has at hand, including some that readers will recognize as secular in provenance.

Because of the liberties the grandfather takes in his re-elaboration of biblical narratives, adding new elements to received stories, one would be tempted to situate his narrative activity in the Midrashic tradition, which has proven a source of fascination to late twentieth-century literary critics.<sup>2</sup> Yet this appealing hypothesis will not hold up. Midrash, for all the freedom with which its practitioners embellish canonical scripture, is first and foremost a method of interpreting sacred texts. The grandfather does not appear explicating the messages and lessons to be drawn from his tales. He is willing to subordinate the ethical teachings of the original source material to the development of gripping plots and the creation of a magic, mythic aura. His story-telling style reveals him as a folk-level narrator who relies on a powerful imagination and a good familiarity with plots derived from scripture. He exhibits no sophisticated knowledge of sacred texts or of exegetical techniques. His granddaughter hints that he is painfully aware of the distance between his talents and the expertise of a learned exegete who has enjoyed the time close textual study requires (70). He exercises little control over the meanings of his stories. Interpretation is often a task left to the audience.

The grandfather is an unabashed exoticist in his use of the Middle Eastern backdrop of his narratives, filling his granddaughter's imagination with "polvorientos caminos de Moab por los que se bambolean camellos cargados de telas, de especias orientales, de pálidos niños que serán vendidos como esclavos . . ." 'dusty roads of Moab, along which came swaying camels laden with fabrics, with Oriental spices, with pale children who would be sold as slaves . . .' (40). His Orientalist embellishments are a reminder that Jewish tradition developed in the Palestine area, where the Hebrews could scarcely avoid intimate contact with polytheistic cults.

The granddaughter, once she has grown into the nostalgic adult narrator, practices a more ethically purposeful form of narrative. When the narrator is the one to tell a story, she is firmly in the Jewish tradition of employing narrative to make a moral point or establish an interpretation. She often finishes her stories by adding judgmental remarks, lamenting the loss of a vividly animated vision of the world: “nadie más pudo ver a los ángeles” ‘nobody ever again was able to see the angels’ (42). Like an outraged prophet inveighing against the surrounding society, she rebukes the modern era for its coldness and absence of imagination. (It should be noted that while the prophets were disturbed by deviance from monotheism, Kamenszain is lamenting the constriction of the imagination that orthodoxy requires.) Her allusions range wider afield than those of her grandfather, in part because she has a more cosmopolitan frame of reference, but also as part of a deliberate heterodoxy, mixing pagan divinities with figures from Jewish tradition. Of all the differences between the grandfather’s and the narrator’s story-telling, perhaps the most important one is that the latter is writing as a woman with a special concern for female figures. Kamenszain’s *De este lado* may be considered feminine; she has called it “femenino por excelencia” ‘feminine par excellence’ (“Toda escritura” 130). It reveals its female perspective, not because it manifests some stylistic or linguistic qualities peculiar to women, but, more demonstrably, by virtue of its thematic emphasis on female entities. It consistently draws special attention to the women characters in well-known narratives and to female divinities and forces.

The narrator shows the reader biblical narratives only after they have been transfigured through the story-telling process, with variants and embellishments. The book contains no citations from canonical scripture. Kamenszain has remarked, looking back on *De este lado*, that it “olía a casero” ‘smelled homemade’ (“Toda escritura” 130), and the childhood story-telling it recreates is certainly homespun. It is important both that the stories are being retold freely, without direct reference to the biblical version, and that they are being designed to appeal to a child, for whom magic and divination still seem like real possibilities. Significant, too, is the fact



that the listening child is a girl, explicitly identified as such by grammatical and thematic indicators. The female child has a proto-feminist way of receiving narrative, for she pays the closest attention to heroines and tales of feminine forces, at times remembering only the female characters in a given story.

Kamenszain's liberal elaboration of themes from Jewish tradition meshes with her development of mythical representations of woman. The author points out connections between her central concerns in the earlier-cited essay of 1986, published under the eloquent title "*Toda escritura es femenina y judía*" (All writing is feminine and Jewish). Recalling that she had earlier written on "*Género femenino y género poético*" 'Feminine gender and poetic genre,' Kamenszain notes: "Releyéndolo ahora que intento reflexionar sobre los caminos que fue adoptando mi trabajo como poeta en relación directa o indirecta con el hecho de ser judía, encuentro grandes similitudes" 'Rereading it now, while I'm trying to reflect on the paths my work as a poet has taken in direct or indirect relation with the fact of being Jewish, I find great similarities' ("*Toda escritura*" 129).

The confluence of these two currents is most evident when Kamenszain uses the eclecticism of folk story-telling to bring out a substratum in Jewish thought that particularly fascinates her: the consciousness of a female divinity. A clear example is when, in *De este lado*, the heroine's grandfather tells the story of Ruth. His embellishments are recognizable as vestigial elements of stories of female seers: "Mi abuelo decía que mientras Ruth peregrinaba por los caminos de la tierra santa sus ojos—fijos en el cielo—vaticinaban las lluvias, dialogaban con los vientos y abrían el espacio necesario para que aparezcan las nubes" 'My grandfather said that while Ruth made her way down the roads of the Holy Land her eyes—which she kept on the sky—foretold the rains, conversed with the winds and opened up the space needed for the clouds to come out' (40). The narrator twice refers to "*la moabita Ruth*" 'Ruth the Moabite,' a reminder that Ruth belonged to the suspect category of foreign wives, famously denounced by Ezra as a threat to monotheism.



The heroine-narrator, who has grown into an erudite and allusive poet, further develops the grandfather's retelling of the Ruth narrative, contributing the notion of a divinely charged female force associated both with maternity and with the imaginative use of language. She adds to "... la historia de la moabita Ruth ... el asombro de saber que la poesía no hace más que continuarla porque es a la vez la madre y la hija de la moabita Ruth" 'the history of Ruth the Moabite ... the astonishment of realizing that all poetry does is continue it, because it is both mother and daughter of Ruth the Moabite' (40). In her retelling of the story, she seeks to recapture the outlook of a child or a premodern person, one who is uninhibited by the fear of appearing idolatrous, superstitious, or demented. Yet, to recreate this past vision, she goes well beyond her grandfather's source material. She shows an acquaintance with the thought of Jung and his successors. She generates a new myth to account for the origin, a feminine and maternal one, of poetic language. Poetry, which is the mother and daughter of Ruth, "es la gran madre en cuyo vientre se genera el complicado tejido de palabras, es la hija que surge de ese vientre para reposar en la intemperie de la imaginación" 'is the great mother in whose womb there grows the complicated web of words; it is the daughter that, from out of that womb, comes to rest out under the open sky of the imagination' (40).

In her own story-telling, Kamenszain mixes the ancient with the modern, borrowing from such sources as D.H. Lawrence, Allen Ginsberg, and T.S. Eliot, selecting out the visionary, archetypal, and mythmaking tendencies in each. Characteristic of her approach is the allusion to Naomi (61). Readers might first expect the word *Naomi* to usher in a treatment of the biblical heroine, since the narrator is lamenting the demise of the mythic dimension. But the Naomi in question is quickly revealed as the mother of Allen Ginsberg, commemorated in his famous long poem "Kaddish" (collected in the 1961 *Kaddish and Other Poems, 1958-1960*). This unexpected turn can be read as a tribute to Ginsberg for his success in creating a modern heroine of mythic force.

Kamenszain's free and original adaptation of biblical and Talmudic narrative material is congruent with the renewed interest, awakened by feminism, in rediscovering those mythic

and religious traditions in which female figures are regarded as possessing divine attributes. As Merlin Stone summarizes the phenomenon: "judging from the startling numbers of women currently involved in the large and rapidly expanding women's spirituality movement, it is primarily women who have responded to reviving the Goddess and are mainly responsible for spreading the word, incorporating the reclamation into so many diverse areas of culture and spiritual celebration today . . . This revival has resulted directly from the women's spirituality movement, which itself grew from the feminist movement, in the United States" (16).

While revisionist in bringing out the residue of nature cults buried in Jewish thought, Kamenszain's eclectic fusion is also traditionalistic in the homage it pays to the long-honored practice of inventive folkloric retelling of narratives taken from canonical sources. The narrative voice in *De este lado* is speaking as an adult living in modern times, but her sympathy is with an earlier era. Variouslly identified with childhood, with poetry, and with a period before religious thought was systematized and purged of traits obviously derived from polytheistic cults, this lost golden age stands out for the prevalence of magic thinking and a belief that meaning is decipherable in all things. The latter is present in the reading of messages in the stars, sun, moon, bodies of water, and weather, and the perception of these entities as, if not divinities, at least personified beings. *De este lado* pays homage to the popular persistence of magic in chiromancy (44, 63) and the reading of character in faces (65). Kamenszain shows nothing of the elite, learned astrology and divination that formed part of Jewish scholarship until these practices fell from repute with modernity.<sup>3</sup> Rather, she focuses upon peasant divination that relies less upon the possession of knowledge than upon an intimate and empathetic connection with nature. In "Intento de inventar una historia" 'Attempt to invent a story' (12-13), the narrator laments both the decline of the impulse behind story-telling and the loss of the communicative potential once perceived in nature. Evoking a bygone age, she gives a list of lost perceptions: "Hoy es difícil inventar una historia porque las piedras (aunque digan algo) no tienen nada que decirme . . . Ya la luna no tiene cara de persona . . . tampoco

Dios es un viejo encorvado de barba larga . . .” ‘Today it is difficult to invent a story because the stones (even if they say something) have nothing to say to me . . . The moon no longer has a person’s face . . . And neither is God a stooped old man with a long beard . . .’ (12-13). This personifying, animistic outlook is associated with the narrator’s childhood view of biblical narrative, which seemed not so different from the invention and telling of entrancing stories: “alguna vez creíste que la biblia había sido inventada por alguien” ‘you once believed that the Bible had been invented by someone’ (12), an exciting belief that is lost with the acquisition of a sophisticated and rationalized outlook.

A number of biblical heroines make appearances in *De este lado*, either in the form the grandfather gave them or as the more judgmental narrator describes them. These are either protagonists of the more magical and fantastic turns of biblical plot or are heroines of more realistic narratives whose biblical characterizations have been supplemented with mythic attributes. For example, from the morally instructive Sodom and Gomorrah narrative, a single element has been extracted for use in *De este lado*. This is “la mujer de Lot convertida en sal” ‘the wife of Lot turned into salt’ (49), the classical transformation tale included near the end of the narrative. As noted, Ruth appears in *De este lado* as a figure of the great mother and a divining sorceress attuned to messages hidden in nature. The narrative of “El paraíso perdido” ‘Paradise lost’ (42-43), is told by the adult narrator rather than being one of the grandfather’s stories. She makes the famous narrative into a lamentation over the erosion of a mythical world. Rather than representing weakness in the face of temptation, Eve is singled out for her ability to converse with the serpent, a sadly lost art in an era in which “solamente hay animales en los zoológicos o en las selvas lejanas o en los dibujos animados” ‘there are only animals in zoos or far-off jungles or the cartoons’ (43). Adam has been edited out of this version of the loss of Eden. The reason appears to be that the serpent did not speak to him: “la serpiente habló con Eva” ‘the serpent spoke to Eve’ (43).

Eve’s exchange with the serpent marks a farewell to the fluid, mythic world, since it occurred “aquel día en que fue perdido el paraíso” ‘that day when Paradise was lost’ (43). In

another passage retelling the Creation story, Eve, who is often portrayed as subordinate and subsidiary to Adam, is given a miraculous autonomy. The narrator recognizes that Eve was originally one of Adam's ribs; yet this very circumstance, far from making her an offshoot of her mate, confers upon her a unique independence: "una Eva nacida de la costilla de Adán hija de nadie en particular" 'an Eve born from Adam's rib daughter of no one in particular' (59). Biblical heroines are agents and bearers of magic and display its amazing effects.

A mythic feminism is covertly present throughout *De este lado*. There is a recurring suggestion that women, in Jewish culture as much as in any other, desire legendary heroines, feminine forces in nature, and perhaps even female divinities with whom to identify. Stone in considering "what reclamation of the Goddess might mean to and for women," observes that "it has been primarily women who have wanted and needed to image deity as female" (16). In Kamenszain's text, it is "las mujeres" 'women' who look on in shock as the moon, once a powerful and worshipped agent, is reduced to a mere object of study, "aplastada por una multitud de pequeños telescopios" 'flattened by a multitude of small telescopes' (22). The narrator declares her own identification with the latently divine moon, entitling this segment "La luna o yo" 'The moon or I' (22).

The current of feminist myth is most overt when Kamenszain treats Bruria, as she does in both *De este lado del Mediterráneo* and "Toda escritura es femenina y judía." Bruria emblemizes the knowledge-starved woman who, blocked from pursuing learning by standard means, resorts to subterfuge to satisfy her longing. The allusions to Bruria fully unite Kamenszain's concern with informal Jewish story-telling and her imagination for legendary and forceful women. The legend of Bruria centers on the inherent conflict between a woman's love of learning and the prohibition against Talmudic study for women and, more broadly, the exclusion of women from traditional Jewish intellectual exchange.

In *De este lado del Mediterráneo*, the theme of Bruria is not broached directly but insinuated into what at first appears to be a different narrative. The narrator first recalls the tales surrounding Rabbi Akiva, attesting to his single-minded de-

votion to sacred study: “cómo Rabí Akiva puede leer ocho días y ocho noches” (how Rabbi Akiva could read for eight days and eight nights; 70). Bruria appears in what at first appears to be the role of devoted helpmeet: Akiva studies “mientras su mujer cose las hojas rotas de una biblia inexistente” ‘while his wife mends the torn pages of a nonexistent Bible’ (70). As the narrative proceeds, Bruria begins to displace Akiva as the dominant focus of attention. The narrator hints that Bruria is eager to have her hands on a Bible, not simply as the perfect wife sanctifying her home, but as a serious student. She is revealed to be an attentive follower of, though not a participant in, theological debate: “espió entre cortinas las interminables discusiones de Akiva con sus discípulos” ‘from behind the curtains she eavesdropped on the interminable discussions of Akiva with his disciples’ (70). While legendarily studious males abound in Jewish tradition, a scholarly woman is distinctive, like heroines of woman-warrior tales. Bruria’s narrative is more satisfying than Akiva’s, especially for an audience of women: it features a knowledge-loving woman employing stealth and her wits to undermine male domination. In closing this story, the narrator even suggests that the determined Bruria, through the fiery intensity of her drive, has even upstaged her husband as the attraction for the learned discussants: “los discípulos de Akiva, los que venían a verla prender el fuego del bosque” ‘Akiva’s disciples, who came to see her light the fire of the woods’ (70).

In “Toda escritura” Kamenszain identifies herself, as a writer and as the narrator-heroine of *De este lado*, with Bruria: listening to her grandfather, “fui una especie de modesta e infantil Bruria” ‘I was a kind of modest child Bruria’ (130). Taking up again the narrative of the rabbi’s learned wife, Kamenszain uses it to develop a feminist theme. Its protagonist emblemizes not only women’s thirst for learning, but also a female approach to knowledge: “si en el mundo masculino de los rabinos la disquisición bíblica era un modo de acceder al poder, en el mundo silencioso y oculto de Bruria se trataba simplemente de una voluntad irrefrenable por acceder al goce desinteresado de la sabiduría . . . gracias a ese desinterés, se hizo más sabia que los propios rabinos” ‘if in the masculine world of the rabbis biblical disquisition was a way of gaining

power, in the silent, hidden world of Bruria there was simply an irrepressible desire to have access to the disinterested joy of wisdom . . . because of this disinterested attitude, she became more learned than the rabbis themselves' (130).

Kamenszain's narratives examined here have one predominant plot and moral: magic has died out in the course of modernization, and this process is a grievous loss. But apart from her defense of an animistic, mythic outlook, and especially the magic generated through story-telling, there coexists a set of concerns centering on women and female properties. Kamenszain in *De este lado* brings back feminine magic forces, such as the moon, and endows biblical heroines with talents befitting sorceresses, priestesses, or goddesses. Her narratives also suggest that women, because of their distinctive experiences and their concern with female elements in narrative, have a special way of reading, learning, and story-telling, whether the text at hand is the constellations or sacred writings.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

1. Tikva Frymer-Kensky reviews these issues at length in *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992). Frymer-Kensky examines in detail, but then rejects, the position that the rediscovery of female divinities is beneficial to real-life women. Her study, which she presents as feminist in outlook, supports monotheistic orthodoxy.

2. The most famous manifestation of current-day critics' interest in Midrash is Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986).

3. Patai, *The Jewish Mind* (New York: Scribner's, 1977) notes a dedication to astrology and supernatural divination among the elite of Jewish scholars in the Hellenic period (93), during the flourishing of Islamic culture (105-106; 123), and among the educated population of the Renaissance (160-61); of the last-named period, he emphasizes: "As far as Jews were concerned, they did not have to borrow this type of belief from their Gentile contemporaries. The venerable pages of their own Talmud abound in descriptions of, or allusions to, the realm of magic, demons, and other infernal manifestations" (160).

4. An earlier version of this paper was read at the Seventh International Research Conference of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association, Philadelphia.

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